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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the academic pecking order myth. Focus was placed on the concepts that whether certain programs within a single-purpose college attract the "better" students, that certain schools or departments maintain the "highest" standards, and that the student in-migration or out-migration patterns within certain groups are either high or low. Three data items were used regarding nearly all incoming college students: rank in high school class, Verbal-College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB)-Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) results, and Nonverbal-CEEB-SAT results. Expected chi-square values for all ranks in high school class and SAT tables were obtained. Results suggest that no academic discipline either significantly benefited or suffered as a result of the significant in-migration or out-migration patterns. (A five-item bibliography is included.) (MJM)

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The Academic Pecking Order: An Examination of a Myth

by

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How many times has it been implied, alluded to, or even blatantly stated that certain major programs within a single purpose college attract the "better" students, or that certain schools or departments within given university maintain the " highest" standards, or that, for various reasons, the student in-migration or out-migration patterns within certain disciplines are either high or low?

For example, in Charles Silberman's monumental work entitled Crisis In The Classroom a case in point is built through the not-so-subtle implications which permeate Chapter 10; "The Teacher As Student".

Clearly, education is at the bottom of the graduate school pecking order in the opinion of many. On the undergraduate level, however, this position is a matter of perspective speculation.

One reason for the clarity in the one situation and the nebulous nature of the other, concerning the more common of the undergraduate and graduate disciplines, may be that education is the only one which generally awards a terminal degree other than the Ph.D. It seems to follow that any degree other than the Ph.D. is suspect and, further, if the degree is suspect, then so too is the program leading to it and on and on in a reverse "buck passing" manner.

This pecking order is evident not only on an inter-institutional and inter-departmental level but also on an intra-institutional and intra-departmental plane as well.

It is frightening that this sort of reasoning is encountered frequently, is rarely confronted, and is passively accepted as an enduring millstone around the neck of the affected discipline.

It is now possible to dissipate the conjecture upon which this pervasive myth is based by applying a technique which utilizes data that are already available on most college and university campuses.

This statistical procedure emerged as a by-product of empirical research which was designed to serve as a statistical model for institutional curricular self-evaluation at a liberal arts college and can be applied broadly to other institutions of higher education.

As the result of reviewing prior research concerning the prediction of success of students' college performance, it was found that the three data items that are readily available regarding nearly all in-coming

college students are; (1.) Rank In High School Class; (2.) Verbal - College Entrance Examination Board - Scholastic Aptitude Test results; and (3.) Non-verbal - College Entrance Examination Board - Scholastic Aptitude Test results.

Some examples of research studies which dealt with these criteria as predictors of academic success were Chauncey and Fredericksen's[1] findings that correlated College Entrance Examination Board - Scholastic Aptitude Test results and freshmen grades for several entering groups of Harvard and Princeton freshmen; Bloom and Peters'[2] research at the National Registration Office at the University of Chicago using the College Entrance Examination Board - Scholastic Aptitude Test in conjunction with both secondary and college grades; Summerskill's[3] investigations of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores in relation to subsequent attrition from college; and Stern's[4] correlations of the Intellectual Climate section of the College Climate Index to the College Entrance Examination Board - Scholastic Aptitude Test verbal score. Jencks and Reisman[5] further reinforced the validity of the choice of the instruments when they stated that these were the best of any known forecasting devices in predicting college achievement.

Twenty-five null hypotheses were formulated which provided for the examination of:

a. Rank In High School Class, Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results, Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results of each division of instruction in relation to national norms on both an input and output basis.

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[1]Chauncey and Fredericksen, "The Functions of Measurement In Educational Placement", pp. 85-116.

[2]Bloom and Peters, The Use of Academic Prediction Scales, pp. 60-61.

[3]Summerskill, "Dropouts from College", p. 635.

[4]Stern, People In Context, p. 141.

[5]Jencks and Reisman, The Academic Revolution, pp. 123-124.

b. Differences between input and output characteristics of Rank In High School Class, Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results, Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results, within each major program of study.

c. Differences between major programs of study when Rank In High School Class, Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test, Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results were considered on an input and output basis.

d. Differences between major programs of study with respect to students' in-migration to one program from another, or out-migration from one program to another.

e. Differences between divisions of instruction when Rank In High School Class, Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results, Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results were considered on an input and output basis.

f. Differences between divisions of instruction with respect to students' in-migration to one division from another, or out-migration from one division to another.

The hypotheses were accepted or rejected on the basis of either chi-square tests, t-tests, or one-way analyses of variance (wherever applicable in each case) at the .05 level of significance.

Expected chi-square values for all Rank In High School Class and Scholastic Aptitude Test tables were obtained from Educational Testing Services, Princeton, New Jersey.

Whenever possible, chi-square and t-test values were obtained with the aid of a Hewlett-Packard 9100B computor.

Examination of the data revealed that:

a. Significant statistical differences did exist when the Rank In High School Class, Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test, and Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results of each division of instruction were compared to national norms on either an input or output basis.

b. Significant statistical differences did not exist between input and output characteristics of Rank In High School Class, Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test, and Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test within each major program of study.

c. Significant statistical differences between major programs of study did exist when Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results were considered on an input and an output basis, and did not exist when Rank In High School Class and Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results were considered on an input and an output basis.

d. Significant statistical differences did exist between major programs of study with respect to students' in-migration to one program from another, and out-migration from one program to another.

e. Significant statistical differences between divisions of instruction did exist when Rank In High School Class or Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results were considered, and did not exist when Verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results were considered on both an input and an output basis.

f. Significant statistical differences between divisions of instruction did exist with respect to students' in-migration to one division from another, or out-migration from one division to another.

At the institution in question, the findings of the study suggested that:

1. Although it may be true that certain major programs of study initially attract students who score significantly higher than the populations of other major programs of study (on the Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test only), it has been shown that no major program of study either benefits or suffers significantly as the result of the net effect of student mobility. This was true regardless of whether the program of study displayed trends of net in-migration, net out-migration, or relative net stability of numbers of students even when considerable mobility took place.

2. When the curricular requirements of each major program were examined in the light of migration patterns the following relationship was found. Programs displaying a high net out-migration trend were found to require the greatest number of course-credit degree requirements while, on the other hand, programs displaying a high net in-migration trend were found to require the lowest number of course-credit degree requirements. It is obvious that a cause and effect relationship exists in this case because it is simply less complicated for a student to migrate into a major program with fewer course-credit requirements than it is to migrate into a program with more requirements, which, in the latter case, could necessitate an extension of the traditional four-year undergraduate experience.

3. Since significant differences exist between major programs of study regarding in-migration and out-migration patterns, and since it has been shown that no major program of study either benefits or suffers significantly in terms of Rank In High School Class, Verbal or Non-verbal - Scholastic Aptitude Test results, it follows that other causes for student mobility should be questioned. Such causes might be related to course-credit

requirements, non-quantifiable positive or negative faculty characteristics, and/or non-quantifiable positive or negative student characteristics.

The foundations of the academic pecking order myth were shattered at the institution upon which this study* was focused when it was found that no academic discipline either significantly benefitted or suffered as the result of the significant in-migration or out-migration patterns (switching of majors) of students that was taking place. In other words, the "better" students were not retained by the "more rigorous" disciplines, and the "lesser" students did not tend to migrate toward the bottom of the pecking order. In fact, the opposite seemed to happen in some instances.

It appears that this self-evaluation technique has the potential to undermine the fallacies upon which the myth has persisted if the desire exists to do so. The question at hand, therefore, is whether or not the potential will be realized through personal institutional commitment and initiative.

Beyond this point we are clearly responsible for the adjudication of the technique and subsequently for the eradication of the myth.

It's now up to us.

* "Curricular Implications of Characteristics of Recent Classes at a Small Liberal Arts Institution", by Bartholomew J. Ciampa, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Mass. Available through Dissertation Abstracts International, Volume XXXIII, Number 2, 1972. 454 pp.

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